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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SL](#)
SUBJECT: APC AND SLPP RE-LAUNCH UNITY RADIO

Ref (A) Freetown 300 (B) Freetown 237

11. SUMMARY: On June 12, Sierra Leone President Ernest Bai Koroma, of the All People's Congress (APC)-led government officially re-launched the opposition Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) Unity Radio 94.9. The Ministry of Information and Communication had closed the radio station on May 8 (Ref B). Several senior SLPP members, former officials of the former SLPP-led government and key civil society representatives attended the launch. The party leadership acknowledged their political differences, but agreed to cooperate and support a peaceful democratic process in Sierra Leone. As the local election campaign period moves into full swing, both parties will need to reaffirm publicly such unity of purpose and urge their followers to do the same. END SUMMARY.

Radio Unity Launched

12. On June 12, President Koroma, along with SLPP opposition stalwarts, re-launched the SLPP radio, Radio Unity. The mood was one of playful competition between the two parties, belying the animosity exhibited since the government shut down the station and the heated negotiations ensued prior to the resumption of transmission. Senior SLPP, civil society and GoSL officials spoke on themes of freedom of speech and the press and media responsibility.

13. Roland Caesar, Acting head of the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) challenged both parties to follow the example of the minority party, the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) in honoring signed commitments to transparency that followed the 2007 national elections.

14. Independent Media Commission (IMC) Commissioner Abubakarr Kargbo stressed the importance of fair and impartial radio and print coverage of candidates' campaign in line with the IMC Media Code of Practice. The Media Code of Practice requires fair and balanced coverage of candidates regardless of gender or political party affiliation and prohibits the provocation of regional and ethnic tensions. SLPP Publicity Committee Chairman Dr. Sama Banya called the negotiations to restore the radio transmission the "longest short journey," and pledged SLPP compliance with all regulations of both the Ministry of Information and Communication and the IMC. Banya confirmed that President Koroma also agreed to address issues regarding the compliance of other domestic and international broadcasters operating in Sierra Leone. Banya, however, noted that, because of the shutdown, the radio will only have only been able to broadcast for one month prior to the July 5 local election, adding that during the 2007 national elections the SLPP-led government had never shutdown the APC radio station.

15. President Koroma replied that when the APC was in the opposition, the party did not have the same access to President Kabbah. President Koroma welcomed an effective opposition radio because it levels the campaign playing field. Success, Koroma said, is now up to the truthfulness of each party's message. In a nod to the colors of the political parties, President Koroma finished his speech with the message that "whether red, orange, or green, the object is for all to rise up and build anew Sierra Leone." (Note: Red represents

the APC, green the SLPP and orange the PMDC).

15. COMMENT: The government and SLPP bear equal responsibility for the initial closure of Unity Radio and the tensions that arose from its abrupt closure. For the government, the move to silence the opposition station appeared to reflect political grandstanding, bureaucratic muscle-flexing, and procedural problems in carrying out telecommunications policy. The SLPP, while stridently expressing their displeasure, failed to acknowledge their own culpability when it was revealed that they had only partially carried out the required steps to legally erect an antenna on land owned by the government. Fortunately, such finger pointing ultimately gave way to effective mediation to resolve the problem in relatively short order. The negotiations not only addressed the immediate concern, but also, with luck, set a precedent for resolving future differences.

16. COMMENT, (Cont): The launch to restart Radio Unity transmissions provided an opportunity for the APC and SLPP parties to affirm publicly their commitment to seek mediation in areas of disagreement. Given the more recent incidents of political intolerance in the northern part of the country (ref A), more frequent displays of unity between the parties will be needed to remind the public that political violence and intolerance undermine Sierra Leone's democratic development. END COMMENT.
Jameson DeBose, Thomas R. Pickering Fellow, drafted this cable.
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